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Will San Diego's Mayor Sip Purified Sewage?

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Just behind San Diego's mayor sat a glass beaker filled nearly to its pointy brim with 400 milliliters of crystal clear water. Fresh from a tap, straight from a treatment process that made the water as clean as mankind knows how to get it: Stripped free of any pharmaceutical traces, of bacteria and viruses, of minerals and other potential impurities.

And the summer air was hot. Wipe-your-brow, so-long-June-gloom, roll-up-your-sleeves hot. Mayor Jerry Sanders had been standing in the inland sun at his University City press conference, baking for a good 20 minutes. The distilled water looked alluring: Crisp and refreshing.

The mayor had just spoken to reporters while standing in front of a maze of shiny silver pipes and whirring pumps now turning a million gallons of sewage into drinking water each day, part of an \$11.8 million city pilot study. It's a key step before regulators will allow San Diego to turn sewage into drinking water. Environmental groups and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have pushed the city toward it, saying San Diego can no longer afford to waste water by dumping partially treated sewage in the ocean.

The test plant, which will run for a year and won't put any water in city drinking supplies, will yield scientific data the city needs to satisfy state health officials. If regulators sign off, San Diego could eventually emulate a large-scale sewage purification plant that opened in Orange County in 2008, capable of converting 70 million gallons of sewage a day into pure drinking water.

The mayor has been one of the concept's chief opponents. That crystal clear beaker held water that Sanders once derided as "toilet-to-tap." But the mayor's face was getting red in the heat, and he'd just told six television cameras that "San

Diego has elected to move beyond its fear and let science do its talking."

This, from a mayor who in 2007 [vetoed the pilot study](#) and has [repeatedly raised fears about pharmaceuticals lurking](#) in purified sewage, even though it goes through a treatment process proven to remove traces of drugs. Our current drinking water supplies don't.

Though the mayor doesn't outright support purifying sewage, he has gradually opened up to the idea, which has bipartisan support from business groups and developers, environmentalists and labor. Sanders said Thursday that San Diego needs to shore up local supplies and reduce its dependence on importing ever-more-expensive water from sources hundreds of miles away. He didn't utter the phrase "toilet-to-tap."

He ended his press conference and walked toward me, shook my hand. I asked if he'd changed his opinion about whether San Diego should purify sewage to boost local supplies.

No, he said. Like regulators, he said, he first wants to know that purified sewage is safe to add to drinking supplies before throwing support behind any big project.

"It's the most difficult decision I'll make as mayor," Sanders said. "Once I'm certain that it's healthy, it makes it a different issue. This is the only decision I'll make that affects literally every single person in the city."

But his words were a sign that Sanders has moved beyond the yuck factor that doomed a similar 1990s effort in San Diego. He'd previously said the public wasn't willing to support purified sewage. [Polls show that's changing](#).

Sanders has long said that he wouldn't quibble with the science behind the concept — science that says the water in that nearly full beaker was perfectly safe to drink. Science that says adding an ice cube of tap water to the beaker would've made the water dirtier. So I tested him.

"Will you take a drink from the beaker?"

"Nooooo," the mayor said. With a nervous laugh.

"Why not?"

"Actually, they won't let you," he said. "The regulators won't allow anybody to drink this. If it had been tested and they said it was safe, you know, I wouldn't hesitate. If it's safe, it's safe, and we can't argue about that."

City Councilman David Alvarez, who's supported purifying sewage, didn't have the same hesitation as the mayor. He later picked up the beaker and confided that he desperately wanted to try it — but couldn't. The regulators, he explained.

Still, he sniffed it. Said it looked clean. And, with prodding from voiceofsandiego.org photographer Sam Hodgson, inched it ever closer to his lips.



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A contractor who'd helped build the project was standing nearby. "No! No! No!" he exclaimed. Alvarez smiled and put the beaker down. City officials don't want to irritate health regulators.

Alvarez, like 1.3 million other San Diegans, will have to wait.



Sam Hodgson contributed to this report.

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